

***PERFORMING GENDER VIOLENCE. PLAYS BY
CONTEMPORARY WOMEN DRAMATISTS.*** Barbara
Ozieblo and Noelia Hernando-Real, eds. New York:
Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. VI+198 pp. ISBN: 978-0-
230-33995-8

EVA GIL CUDER
Universidad de Sevilla
gilcud@us.es

The publishing of Elin Diamond's revealing book *Unmaking Mimesis* in 1997 consolidated the development of a new critical field aiming at a theater-specific feminist criticism. Distinguishing the crucial elements of Brecht's theatrical project and identifying the targets of contemporary feminist theater, Diamond contends that feminist theater studies appropriate Brechtian theory in order to formulate a representation of the female body onstage "that resists fetishization" (44), thus revising and reinterpreting appearances, gestures, words and behavior that predominant social standards have associated with femininity. In this vein, Diamond inaugurates what she calls "gestic feminist criticism", a new paradigm that pursues the deconstruction and interrogation of female identities onstage through Brechtian strategies.

In their volume *Performing Gender Violence. Plays by Contemporary American Women Dramatists*, Barbara Ozieblo and Noelia Hernando-Real rely on Diamond's findings and provide a thorough study which demonstrates how the performative deconstruction of the female body is effected on the stage, thus contesting normative patriarchal representations. They argue that feminist drama should create positive feminine models that set example and allow the audience the opportunity to face a female perspective. The collected essays in this volume explore uncharted territory and concentrate on the work of American women dramatists written in the last forty years whose focus is the representation of gender violence onstage. In this vein, they enrich Diamond's feminist critical stance by approaching the work of female authors from varied ethnic and national origins (Heather Raffo, Lynn Nottage, Paula Vogel, Julia Cho, or Stephanie Zadravec), whose work does not limit the scope of gender violence to the domestic sphere, as they explore understudied realms such as gender violence at work, in war or in the field of medical treatment.

The volume is divided into nine sections that are preceded by an introduction where the editors identify the perspective to be followed and the tools

used in their interrogation of female identities as represented onstage by contemporary women playwrights. The book does not provide a concluding chapter, as it is the result of the collaborative work of the Research Group on American women writers coordinated by Barbara Ozieblo at the University of Malaga. Hence, each author draws her own conclusions but they can all be jointly summarized as moving towards the rejection of the traditionally accepted role of women onstage as helpless and vulnerable victims.

“Violence Against Women: Forms and Responses”, the first of the nine chapters, is a thoroughly documented update in the field of gender studies in the United States. The authors revise the incipient attempt to deal with gender violence in the literatures from the seventies to the nineties in the United States. In this way, this section of the book works as a backbone for the rest of the chapters as it tackles the difficulties undergone in the search for an all embracing term denoting gender violence in all possible scenarios, and how those scenarios have in addition expanded over the years. This is so to the point that towards the end of the chapter the authors identify yet another form of violence against women who are under medical treatment and whose bodies are regarded as objects rather than as subjects by the male medical gaze.

In the second chapter, “American Women Playwrights and Violence against Women”, Hernando-Real and Ozieblo try to define feminist theater and delve into what kind of audience that particular type of theatrical representation is addressed to. The authors provide a useful revision of the critical work on feminist playwriting to date, pointing out how significant and influential Linda Walsh Jenkins’s *Women in American Theater* (1984) or Gayle Austin’s *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism* (1990) were, among others, for the consolidation of feminist theater criticism. The theoretical backbone at the basis of this volume is once again foregrounded, as the authors explore the Brechtian effects that staged violence may have on the audience and underline the dangers to awaken violent feelings in viewers by performing gender abuse onstage. A well-researched exploration of theater theory leads the authors to the conclusion that “[t]he audience is not passive in these perceptions of theater, but must accept responsibility for what is observed and therefore prepared to act” (35). This call to action points back to Brecht, Artaud or Boal, and it regards the spectator not as mere witness but as active subject involved in the dramatic action onstage. The authors insist on the playwright’s need to demolish the barrier of theatrical form so as to prevent the awakening of erotic desire in some viewers/readers, thus rejecting classical practices such as Aristotelian mimesis, which, they argue, strengthens the existing social patriarchal structure by the make-belief strategy of the well-made realist drama (36). Elin Diamond’s contributions on such matter (“mimesis mimicry” or the rupture with traditional realist conventions as part of a feminist strategy to dismantle the male gaze) inevitably come to the foreground here.

After this exhaustive revision of feminist theory and feminist drama, the third chapter, “My home, my battleground: The deconstructions of the American family”, initiates this volume’s analytical approach to particular theatrical works by contemporary women playwrights. Hernando-Real provides an insightful study of the Brechtian techniques that dismantle the so far predominant male gaze in theatrical representations of the domestic realm, particularly focusing on plays by Paula Vogel, Marsha Norman and Maria Irene Fornes. Hernando-Real argues that, in contrast to what we find on TV and the media, theatrical representations tend to focus on the deconstruction of the lie at home, and they predominantly do so from a male perspective (Sam Shepard’s *Buried Child* or Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*) since, “how could a woman dare to demolish the sanctity of home, her natural place?” (40). Her contribution concentrates on the theatrical strategies devised by Vogel, Norman and Fornes so as to achieve this desired effect: the dismantling of the predominant male gaze in drama and the representation on the stage of a female perspective.

Hernando-Real’s views on female resistance to patriarchal values contrast with, and at the same time complement, the next section of the volume. She offers alternatives to encourage women’s resistance and reaction to patriarchal standards by theatrical means that emphasize the powerful, individual, and constant response required of women so as to gain their independence and selfhood, thus leaving behind the traditional victim role. On the other hand, in “The Role of Female Bonding on the Stage of Violence”, María Dolores Narbona-Carrión sets the focus on the power of female bonding to fight against gender violence. Her innovative approach to solidarity amongst women as a tool to overcome patriarchal abuses (most of the studies dealing with this subject concentrate exclusively on the narrative genre) centers on an extensive analysis of Lynn Nottage’s *Ruined* (2009) and *Poof!* (1993), and Heather McDonald’s *Dream of a Common Language* (1992). In this chapter she successfully demonstrates how these plays show that female strength and rebellion can derive from this powerful bond, and considers that theater has the responsibility to reinforce female bonds, as they may constitute an influential means of minimizing or, ultimately, putting an end to gender violence.

This sense of hope is substituted by harsh social criticism in Miriam López-Rodríguez’s chapter, “A Stalker, a Serial Killer, and the Women who Survived them: Psychological Abuse as a Form of Gender Violence”. In this section, López-Rodríguez explores psychological abuse in two plays by Rebecca Gilman and Julia Cho (*Boy Meets Girl* and *BFE*, respectively), arguing that they do not aim at offering possible solutions to prevent or to fight gender abuse, but they rather study and condemn the social environment that indoctrinates the individual to passively accept these kinds of gender-based attacks. Connecting with the initial claim made in the introduction to this volume, López-Rodríguez contends that there is the moral

need to establish a feasible model for women in feminist plays if society is to start following new behavioral patterns.

Marta Fernández-Morales also aims at the identification of a less conventional form of gender abuse in her chapter entitled “The New Breast Cancer (Im)Patient: Female Revolt against Biomedical Violence in US Drama”. Here, Fernández-Morales analyses thoroughly uncharted territory in the study of gender violence literature: the dehumanization and dismembering of the female body to be scrutinized by the male medical gaze as a consequence of the growingly medicalized society. As the author comments in this chapter, other forms of narrative and representational means have already dealt with biomedical violence, but it is the theatrical scenario that (as López-Rodríguez also reminded us in the previous chapter) provokes reflection, discussion, and raises awareness due to the context of immediacy in which it is situated. The author of this section provides an extensive introduction to health issues (and, in particular, breast cancer) in connection to gender violence and coincides with Arthur Kleinman (*Illness Narratives*) in his terminological classification within the field (she will distinguish terms such as “illness”, “disease” and “sickness”). Reacting against such discriminating cultural and medical standards, Fernández-Morales argues, women playwrights have responded with different dramatic strategies, including Brechtian alienation and Boalian calls-to-action, so as to raise the audience’s awareness regarding this particular manifestation of patriarchal domination. Fernández-Morales’ appeal to foreground the “relevance of the body within cancer narratives” (109) successfully moves in the direction of female healing and survival, thus confronting the misogynist propensity to dismember and dehumanize the ill female body.

The collective work carried out by the authors of this volume converges effortlessly and moves towards the same direction, as proved by Inmaculada Pineda-Hernández and her illuminating chapter, “Survival Strategies in Recent Plays by African American Women Playwrights”. Pineda-Hernández masterfully recapitulates and follows from the findings and conclusions reached in previous chapters. In this way, she relies on female bonding (or the lack of it) as the determinant factor for the women in the plays she will examine “to finally recover (or not) from the trauma of having been victims of some type of violence” (114). Additionally, the clarity and methodical disposition of this chapter is praiseworthy. She clearly distinguishes four different survival strategies developed by the women in the plays she will analyze: “hurting oneself, killing one’s offspring, tolerating violence, and killing the perpetrator” (114). This being the case, her study of Cheryl L. West’s *Jar the Floor* (1991), Susan-Lori Parks’s *In the Blood* (1999) and Pearl Cleage’s *A Song for Coretta* (2007) and *Flyin’ West* (1992) focuses on the tendency of the women in these plays to use violence “to transform the victim role into a victim-perpetrator role” (115). Pineda-Hernández’s concluding remarks point to the idea that the women in the plays examined here move towards agency and manage

to leave their victimization behind by means of the different strategies analyzed. Nevertheless, unless they receive the support of other women who listen to their verbal reconstruction of the trauma, their attempt to recover remains useless.

The last two chapters in this volume involve a transition towards the study of the affective reaction in the spectator of feminist plays performing gender violence, something that was already hinted at in previous chapters. Ilka Saal's "Documenting War: Theatrical Interventions by Emily Mann and Heather Raffo" is a conscientious approach to Documentary Theater and the means there used to formulate a traumatic situation so that it can activate the audience's empathy and shock their consciousness (131). Saal relies on Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) so as to set the grounds and aims of her study and identify the questions to be answered by it: "How to represent the pain of others so that it can still affect the spectator" (131). With this investigative purpose in mind, Saal analyzes two plays that share an interest in exploring the female experience of war but which offer different possibilities for their female protagonists to overcome the trauma provoked by war, as a consequence of the two playwrights' opposing views in terms of "the suture of the real with the theatrical" (133). Accordingly, Saal contrasts these two views on Documentary Theater: Mann's stark obedience to veracity and objectivity with Raffo's documentary approach, which recognizes the need for narrative reconstruction to alleviate the wounds provoked by war trauma. Hence, her exhaustive study on Documentary Drama successfully demonstrates that an artistic (theatrical, in this case) representation that overtly rejects poetic intervention will leave the members of the audience disoriented in terms of which direction to follow once the facts have been represented on the stage. Contrarily, Saal argues, Raffo's work effectively guides the audience's moral sentiments aroused by her play due to the "stylized and decidedly personal" (144) nature of her approach.

Following from Saal's enriching conclusions, Barbara Ozieblo provides another view of audience response in "The Victim and the Audience's Pleasure: An Exploration of Carson Kreitzer's *Self Defense* and Stefanie Zdravec's *Honey Brown Eyes*". Ozieblo's fascinating chapter delves into yet unexplored questions that she aims to answer with her in-depth study on audience theory and the case studies explored in this chapter. She will undertake a study of Carson Kreitzer's *Self Defense Or Death of Some Salesmen* (2001) and Stefanie Zdravec's *Honey Brown Eyes* (2008) so as to answer the initial question she poses in her chapter: how is audience pleasure elicited in these disturbing and violent plays? (157). In this vein, the volume closes by reminding us why Brechtian theory is appropriate to reformulate theater studies from a feminist perspective: the audience's reaction is awakened by reminding them of their status as witnesses and yet by bringing them close enough to the action so as to prompt empathy and understanding.

Despite the absence of some concluding remarks, one finishes this volume with an integrated understanding of the predominant theatrical strategies used in contemporary feminist theater so as to foreground women's agency and so as to establish a positive role model for battered women in diverse fields (in war, the domestic realm, under the medical gaze, with or without the support of other women, and all other fields thoroughly explored in this volume). All chapters in this book move towards the same direction: that of denouncing gender abuse and proclaiming the theatrical stage as an appropriate scenario to expose patriarchal society's intolerable resignation to gender violence. Perhaps one misses a reference to relevant Trauma Theory authors (such as Cathy Caruth or Dominick LaCapra) in the chapters questioning whether complete veracity and objectivity may be achieved in trauma representation through Documentary Theater, or in their discussion of trauma survival as opposed to trauma recovery and recognition. These absences notwithstanding, their research purposes, well identified and sustained from the beginning of this volume, center on the examination of theater as an indoctrinating tool "disturbing people into action" (28) so as to provoke a social change, entertainment being incidental. Therefore, this is an extremely well-structured and well-written collection of essays whose argumentative flow is straightforwardly stated and built upon by the different authors, thus integrating a turning point in contemporary criticism about feminist theater.

WORKS CITED

- AUSTIN, Gayle. *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990.
- CHO, Julia. "BFE." *American Theater*, 22.7 (Sept. 2005): 47-61.
- CLEAGE, Pearl. *Flyin' West and Other Plays*. New York: Theater Communications Group, 1999.
- _____. *A Song for Coretta*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2007.
- DIAMOND, Elin. *Unmaking Mimesis*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- GILMAN, Rebecca. *Boy Meets Girl*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2000.
- JENKINS, Linda Walsh. "Locating the Language of Gender Experience." *Women and Performance* 2.1 (1984): 9-11.
- KLEIMAN, Arthur. *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing and the Human Condition*. New York: Basic Books, 1988.
- Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos* 16 (2012). Seville, Spain, ISSN 1133-309-X, 159-165

KREITZER, Carson. *Self Defense Or Death of Some Salesmen. Women Playwrights, the Best Plays of 2002*. Edited by D.L. Lepidus. Hanover: Smith and Kraus, 2003. 273-327.

MCDONALD, Heather. *Dream of a Common Language. Here to Stay: Five Plays from the Women's Project*. Edited by Julia Miles. New York and London: Applause, 1997. 125-200.

NOTTAGE, Lynn. *Poof! Crumbs from the Table of Joy and Other Plays*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2004. 89-104.

_____. *Ruined*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2010.

PARKS, Susan-Lori. *In the Blood. The Red Letter Plays*. New York: Theater Communications Group, 2001. 1-112.

SONTAG, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of others*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003.

ZADRAVEC, Stefanie. "Honey Brown Eyes." *American Theater* 26.2 (Feb. 2009): 57-75.